

**SHAIVISM AND SUFISM IN
KASHMIR: LAL DED AND
NANDA RISHI'S
CONCEPTIONS OF
SYNCRETIC CULTURE IN
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Abstract

The paper begins by providing an overview of Kashmir Shaivism, tracing its origins. Lal Ded is a distinguished female Shaiva saint of Kashmir, whose poetic expressions or 'vaakhs' are foundational to the Kashmiri language. This article highlights how Lal Ded's spiritual journey was influenced by Hindu Shaivism and Sufism, leading to a unique synthesis of these traditions in her teachings. The research article also examines the philosophical and cultural syncretism between Shaivism and Sufism in Kashmir, focusing on the lives and teachings of two influential figures: Lal Ded and Nanda Rishi. The present paper highlights the significance of Nanda Rishi, a Kashmiri Rishi who was wrongly portrayed as a proselytiser, but was a true humanist dedicated to meditation and pursuing higher spiritual ascension. The paper emphasises the importance of the Rishi movement in shaping the cultural and religious landscape of Kashmir, as well as its role in the spread of Islam through a Sufi tradition that was distinct from the orthodox approach. The unique insights uncovered in this research are the deep-rooted syncretic nature of Kashmiri culture, where the traditions of Shaivism and Sufism coexisted and influenced each other, giving rise to spiritual figures like Lal Ded and Nanda Rishi who embodied this synthesis. The present paper highlights the importance of historical and cultural context, while incorporating additional disciplinary perspectives from religious studies, sociology, anthropology, literary analysis, and material culture studies, can yield a richer, multifaceted analysis of the complex

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interactions between Kashmir Shaivism and Sufism during this transformative period.

Keywords

Shaivism, Sufism, Rishism, Lal Ded, Nuruddin, Syncretism

Introduction

From ancient times, Kashmir was a land of Hindu sages and Rishis. Various philosophical ideas or communities of Hinduism were widely practiced in Kashmir; one of them was Shaiva philosophy (Singh, 2005, p. 12). The philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism is deeply rooted in the Tantras, and its lineage begins with Shaiva traditions. According to tradition, during the Kali Yuga, Shiva took the form of Srikantanatha on Mount Kailash, where he fully initiated the sage Durvasa in all areas of Tantric knowledge, including Abheda (the concept of oneness), Vedaveda (knowledge both with and without distinctions), and Veda (knowledge that recognises differences) (Dyczkowski, 1987, pp. 45–47). These concepts are described in the Bhairava Tantra, Rudra Tantra, and Shiva Tantra, respectively. Durvasa's "mind-born" son, Tryambaka, focused on Bhairava Tantra and presented the Advaita Abheda philosophy in Hinduism. This initiation is regarded as the foundation of Kashmir Shaivism, where Shiva is the unchanging reality—the underlying fundamental level of the whole universe. He has infinite aspects of Shakti or power (Muller-Ortega, 1989, p. 63). In the 14th century, Kashmir's Lal Ded was a distinguished Shaiva saint whose poetic works, known as *vaakhs*, are considered the pillar of Kashmiri linguistics. Lal Ded's writings reflect the influence of both Hindu Shaivism and Sufism, as she was exposed to various spiritual perspectives throughout her life (Hassan, 2011, pp. 74–75). Her *vaakhs* explore the different levels of consciousness and unity within duality, representing a syncretic approach to spirituality.

The spread of Islamic influence in Kashmir can be traced back to the 10th century, when Turks, Persians, Arab traders, and Sufi missionaries began to enter the region (Rafiqi, 2003, p. 41). By the 14th century, this influence had intensified, particularly under the guidance of Sheikh Nur-ud-Din (Kashmiri Hindus known him as Nund Rishi or Sahajananda), who emerged as a central spiritual authority in the valley. Nur-ud-Din's teachings emphasised tolerance and the peaceful coexistence of diverse communities, thereby shaping the distinct ethos of Kashmiri Islam (Kaw, 2004, p. 116). During this period, Kashmiri Sufism developed along two broad currents: the orthodox Sufis, largely influenced by Persian

and Central Asian traditions, and the indigenous Rishi order, which cultivated a more inclusive and locally rooted spiritual approach (Rizvi, 1983, p. 289). The Rishis, inspired by the example of Nur-ud-Din, represented a unique Kashmiri form of mysticism that integrated elements from both Islam and pre-Islamic traditions (Lawrence, 2005, p. 152). A comprehensive understanding of Kashmiri Sufism, therefore, requires examining its intersections with both Shaivism and the indigenous sage tradition of the valley. In this context, two figures are especially significant: Lal Ded (Lalleshwari), the Shaivite mystic whose *vaakhs* articulated a simplified interpretation of Kashmir Shaivism, and Nund Rishi, whose poetry and teachings advanced a vision of spiritual egalitarianism. Together, these figures exemplify the syncretic foundations of Kashmiri spirituality. The present study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the complex interactions between Kashmir Shaivism and Sufism. However, implementing such a comprehensive analytical framework has to face some potential limitations and challenges.

Historical Context

Kashmir's history includes long periods of Hindu and Buddhist rule before Islam became prominent in the Valley. The spread of Islam in Kashmir was shaped less by conquest than by spiritual outreach through Sufi missionaries, who encouraged a syncretic religious culture (Kaw, 2004, pp. 15–16; Khan, 1994, pp. 23–24). The interaction between Shaivism and Sufism likely developed through peaceful coexistence and mutual influence. Kashmir Shaivism emphasizes that the entire cosmos is a manifestation of Śiva's consciousness—a monistic system in which the individual soul (*jīva*) and the universal (Śiva) are ultimately one (Singh, 1963, p. 37). Sufism, in its mystical dimensions, similarly stresses union with the Divine (*fanā'*), echoing non-dualistic perspectives of oneness of existence, love, devotion, and inner realization. Both traditions employ poetry and music as vehicles of spiritual expression. Lal Ded's *vaakhs* and Nund Rishi's *shruks* rely on metaphor and allegory to communicate teachings about impermanence, unity, and self-realization. Lal Ded's verses, in particular, embody the metaphysical insights of Kashmiri Shaivism while resonating with the mystical longings characteristic of Sufism (Parimoo, 1978, pp. 52–54).

After the decline of Hindu political authority around the 14th century, Sufi orders gained cultural prominence. Rather than erasing local traditions, they absorbed and reinterpreted them—

leading to a uniquely syncretic Kashmiri spirituality. Kashmir Shaivism's notion of *pratyabhijñā* (recognition) aligns with Sufism's concept of *ma'rifa* (gnosis)—both emphasize direct, inner knowledge of ultimate reality. Both traditions place primacy on the spiritual teacher or guru, and stress modalities such as meditation, *dhikr* (remembrance), and other inward practices over external ritual. The Rishi tradition that emerged—especially via Nund Rishi—embodies this blending. Nund Rishi is revered as a bridge between Shaiva and Sufi heritages, founding a local order that championed simplicity, non-violence, equality, and direct personal experience of the divine (Raina, 2014, p. 112). Likewise, the Rishis' fusion of Hindu mysticism with Sufi devotion cultivated communal harmony and spiritual unity.

While there's syncretism, there might have been tensions too—Orthodox practitioners from both sides sometimes opposed the blending of traditions, as seen in debates around *samā'* where jurists criticized musical devotion while Sufis defended it (Lewisohn, 1997, pp. 1–2). In Kashmir, however, the Rishi order of Sufis is known for tolerance and for integrating local customs; even Mughal chroniclers noted the special esteem in which the Rishis were held. The Qādiriyya (a transregional Sufi *ṭarīqa*) brought more conventional lodge-based *dhikr* lineages to the Valley, whereas the indigenous Rishis emphasised simplicity and accommodation to Kashmiri lifeways; the early spread of Sufism in Kashmir is linked to figures such as Bulbul Shah and to 14th-century political change under Shāh Mīr. Kashmir Śaivism centers on Śiva's dynamic power (*Śakti*)—the universe as the real manifestation of Śiva's energy (*spanda*)—a point made succinctly in Kṣemarāja's *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam* (Singh, 1963, p. 37). Sufism's ideal of nearness or unity with God (through *dhikr*, *fanā'*/*baqā'*, and contemplative practice) can look analogous, though articulated firmly within an Islamic theological framework (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 164–166). In modern times, this shared Shaiva–Sufi heritage is still invoked as a cultural cornerstone of Kashmiriyat, and scholars and civic groups explicitly promote it as a model for intercommunal harmony. Lal Ded (14th c.) likely predated or overlapped the earliest Sufi missionaries; the 14th century also saw figures like Bulbul Shah and the foundation of Shah Mir dynasty, while the Rishi movement took clearer shape with Nund Rishi in the late 14th–early 15th century. In terms of practice, both streams use breath regulation, chanting, and meditation—the Sufis with *habs-i dam* (breath restraint), *dhikr*, and *samā'*, and the Śaiva side with *mantra-japa* and contemplative tantric ritual aimed at recognition of the Self—

overlapping in intention if different in form (Green, 2012, p. 88; Singh, 1963, p. 37).

Foundation of Shaivism

Kashmir was historically a cosmopolitan region that witnessed the intermingling of diverse cultural and religious traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, even from the early centuries (Kaw, 2004, pp. 12–13). Worship of Śiva was widespread in Kashmir from an early period, with references to Śiva temples and shrines found in ancient sources such as Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgīnī*. Early Kashmiri Śaivism reflected the Pāsupata school, which emphasized a dualistic orientation (Chakravarti, 1986, pp. 78–79). From the 8th–9th centuries, however, the Śaiva system in Kashmir underwent a transformation and began advocating a form of idealistic monism, eventually known as Trika Śāstra (Pandey, 2008, p. 6). Trika Śaivism emerged as a response to the intellectual and religious conflicts of the period, with Vasugupta traditionally credited with the revelation of the Śiva Sūtras, which articulated the principles of non-dualistic idealism.

The Karkota and Utpala dynasties played a pivotal role in the development of Kashmiri Shaivism. Every associate of the Karkota family, particularly King Lalitaditya, was known for their devotion to Shiva. Lalitaditya is credited with constructing a monumental stone temple dedicated to Shiva Jyestharudra and granting land and villages for its maintenance (Stein, 1900, p. 145). The succeeding Utpala dynasty also extended patronage to Shaivism. Under King Avantivarman, his minister Sura commissioned a temple in honour of Shiva and his consort, reinforcing the tradition's royal support (Stein, 1900, p. 276).

The political expansion under Lalitaditya and the cultural consolidation during Avantivarman's reign in the 8th–9th centuries created a favourable environment for Shaivism to thrive in Kashmir (Sanderson, 2009, pp. 52–54). The tradition advanced further in the 10th–11th centuries through the work of the philosopher and polymath Abhinavagupta, who made seminal contributions to metaphysics, aesthetics, and Tantra (Raina, 2014, pp. 72–75). Earlier masters such as Somananda and Utpaladeva, along with Abhinavagupta, were instrumental in developing the Pratyabhijñā-Śāstra and Spanda-Śāstra, which together formed the foundation of the Trika system (Dyczkowski, 1987, pp. 34–39). Significantly, Kashmiri Shaivism distinguished itself through its inclusive orientation, welcoming aspirants regardless of caste, creed, or gender (Pandit, 1997, p. 21). Philosophically, it developed as a system of idealistic monism

grounded in the Śiva Sūtras, which outline the threefold principles of God, Soul, and Matter.

Abhinavagupta's Contribution

Abhinavagupta, one of the foremost thinkers of Kashmiri Shaivism, presents manifestation as the expression of universal consciousness appearing outwardly to the individual (Tantray et al., 2018, p. 1). He illustrates this with the image of waves rising from the ocean, conveying how the infinite consciousness unfolds into diverse forms. Similarly, he compares the world to reflections in a mirror: although trees, rivers, and villages seem separate from the mirror, they are inseparable from it. In the same way, the world, as reflected in universal consciousness, is not distinct from that consciousness. Manifestation, then, is the process by which universal consciousness appears as if external to the empirical observer (Abhinavagupta, trans. Singh, 1989, p. 121).

According to N. Rastogi, “Abhinavagupta has written on very scientific principles; it offers a most updated (of course, till his period), extremely comprehensive and truly systematic account of the tantric material and thereby offers a model for modern research” (Rastogi, 1987, p.ix). The devotees of this religion lectured on the Shivite legend in the neighbourhood's linguistics. In his announcement, Abhinavagupta concedes that the profound order of this faction remained exceptionally extreme. This can't be decided that this clique is more likely than not to be exceptionally well known among the regular masses of Kashmir. This is assumed that the mass prevalence is more likely than not, as respected Abhinavagupta put them in his book of ‘Tantraloka’. Generally, Sanskrit researchers have by and large disregarded such intersection reference. In this Book, “he systematised the philosophy and religion of Tantra in a cogent and coherent way. The ‘Tantraloka’ is the most rational and logical presentation of the *Tantrik* position of existence” (Chitkara, 2002, p.26).

Philosophical and Metaphysical Foundations

The 'philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism is deeply rooted in the Tantras', indicating the importance of Tantric texts and concepts to this tradition. The present study outlines some of the key metaphysical principles of Kashmir Shaivism, such as Shiva as the 'unchanging reality' and the 'underlying fundamental level of the whole universe' with 'infinite aspects of Shakti or power' (Qazi, 2023, para. 1). It mentions that according to tradition, Shiva initiated the sage Durvasa in 'all areas of Tantric knowledge, including Abhedha (the concept of oneness), Vedaveda (knowledge

both with and without distinctions), and Veda (knowledge that recognizes differences)' (Parabhairava.org, 2025, para. 1). These concepts are described as being presented in the Bhairava Tantra, Rudra Tantra, and Shiva Tantra, respectively. Shiva is seen as the 'unchanging reality' and the 'underlying fundamental level of the whole universe' within Kashmir Shaivism. Shiva is understood to have 'infinite aspects of Shakti or power', including Chit (intellect), Ananda (joy), Ichcha (will), Jnana (knowledge), and Kriya (creative power) (Qazi, 2023, para. 1). These interrelated concepts thus form the philosophical and metaphysical foundation for understanding the nature of the divine, the relationship between the absolute and the relative, and the various levels of spiritual consciousness within Kashmir Shaivism. In essence, Lal Ded's perspective on Islam and Sufism is one of harmonious integration, viewing them as valid, parallel paths to divine truth. Her work underscores the universality of mystical experience, where the essence of spirituality transcends religious boundaries, aligning closely with Sufi ideals of love, unity, and inner transformation.

Syncretic Influence and Shaivite Lal Ded

Lalla Yogeshwari, a distinguished feminine Shaiva saint of Kashmir, about whom hardly any work was stated in the academic world. The present-day canon of her poetry is also popularly known for her "expressions" or even vaakhs since they're famous in Kashmir. Her literature is most imputed to delivering the cornerstone of the Kashmiri language. Although Lalla's spiritual journey was rooted in Kashmiri Shaivism, her thought was shaped by exposure to diverse perspectives on faith, spirituality, and God throughout her life (Parimoo, 1987, pp. 45–46). Her work cannot be confined solely to Hindu Shaivism or Sufism; rather, it reflects an engagement with Islamic teachings and Semitic traditions as well. Lalla's vaakhs illustrate her progression from an understanding of the absolute toward broader spiritual insights. She tries to convey the many different heights of consciousness of their unity within duality--that the understanding of this world. Lalla clarifies that the course of action by which slow mental alteration of this procedure for reflection does occur, as you meditate around the origin of every one of those fundamentals. According to Roberts (1995), this transpires when an individual overcomes the constraining power of maya, which entangles consciousness in the realm of names and forms (p. 34). Such a relation is additionally clarified further by the Sufis, for example, Hamadani, along with Nooruddin

Nurani. Although Lalla's spiritual journey originated within the framework of Kashmiri Shaivism, her ideas were profoundly shaped by engagement with diverse perspectives on faith, spirituality, and the nature of the divine throughout her life (Parimoo, 1987, pp. 45–46). Consequently, her work cannot be understood solely within the boundaries of Hindu Shaivism or Sufism; it also reflects the influence of Islamic teachings and Semitic traditions. Lalla's *vaakhs* reveal her progression from an initial comprehension of the absolute toward broader spiritual insights. In this context, her *vaakhs* systematically integrate core principles and practices for realizing ultimate truth, effectively synthesising Shaivite and Sufi concepts—a testament to the syncretic spiritual culture that characterised fourteenth-century Kashmir.

The arrival of Sufis from Persia and Central Asia in Kashmir coincided with the emergence of a distinct Sufi adaptation known as the Rishi order, which promoted the peaceful coexistence of all people. This development led to two broad currents of Sufism in the region: migrant Sufis, who generally adhered to orthodox practices from Persia and Central Asia, and native Rishis, who embraced a more inclusive system of coexistence (Dar, 2004, pp. 115–116). The Rishis drew their inspiration primarily from popular devotion, emphasising love for humanity rather than engaging in formal Islamic missionary work, such as establishing madrasas, and maintaining a distance from political authorities. Intentionally or not, they cultivated ethical principles comparable to the refined spiritual ideals associated with Rumi, incorporating practices such as bodily discipline and rigorous asceticism similar to those of the Yogis. The Rishis did not pledge allegiance to any specific Sufi master and were receptive to the teachings and practices of Hindu ascetics, particularly the Shaivites of Kashmir.

It is noteworthy that Lal Ded requires earnest and careful scholarly attention. Her Kashmiri sayings must first be philologically evaluated to grasp the authentic meaning of her teachings. While her exact role in shaping spiritually motivated Sufi thought remains debated, her poems (*vaakhs*) reflect an amalgam of mystical Shaivism and Sufism, resonating deeply with the masses, who revered her as Lalla Arifa among Muslims and Lalleshwari among Hindus (Kak, 2017, p. 42; Kaul, 2020, p. 118). Her spirituality, accessible to common people under the rule of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, reflected a move towards yogic practices interpreted through a syncretic lens (Toshkhani, 2014, p. 67).

Kashmir Shaivism itself is rooted in Tantric traditions and the teachings of figures such as Srikantanatha and Lal Ded, whose

spiritual journey embodied both Shaiva and Sufi influences. Her poetry captures this synthesis of traditions, bridging the mystical philosophies of both faiths (Bazaz, 2011, p. 211). By the 14th century, the growing influence of Islam through Persian, Turkish, and Arab interactions accelerated religious transformations, leading to the conversion of many Kashmiri Hindus. The Rishi order, founded by Nanda Rishi and further developed by Nur-ud-Din, emphasized peaceful coexistence and incorporated both Shaiva and Islamic elements (Shafi, 2016, p. 89). Through their emphasis on simplicity, devotion, and unity, the Rishis helped spread Islam in Kashmir while preserving local traditions, a process exemplified by the teachings of Lal Ded and Nanda Rishi (Raina, 2019, p. 154). This synthesis gave rise to Kashmiriyat, the shared cultural ethos of Kashmir built on Shaiva–Sufi syncretism (Dar, 2021, p. 233).

Nur-ud-Din a Sufi Rishi

Nanda Rishi, known for his humanitarian outlook and absence of malice, has often been incorrectly depicted as an eager proselytizer seeking to convert Bhoma Rishi to Islam. In truth, he was a celibate vegetarian who dedicated much of his life to meditation and spiritual development, embodying ethical and spiritual principles shared by Buddhists, Shaivites, and other contemporary traditions. His unwillingness to accept the religious or spiritual authority claimed by the Sayyids, particularly Mir Mohammad Hamdani, led to their opposition. Drawing upon Kashmir's ancient spiritual heritage, the indigenous sage movement emphasized the cultivation of higher spiritual and humanistic values, creating a mindset that influenced many Kashmiris toward Islam. Through this movement, the valley experienced a significant cultural and spiritual revitalisation. Within this framework, the contributions of Nur-ud-Din to the spread of Islam in Kashmir are regarded as more influential than those of Sayyid Ali Hamadani, as Islam was introduced through a Sufi movement that continues to maintain its distinctive character in the region (Para et al., 2022, pp. 5–6; Khan, 1986, p. 122).

The Rishi order of Sufism stands as the most significant influence on the Kashmiris' sense of Kashmiriyat. Nur-ud-Din, also known as Nund Rishi, founded the Islamic Rishi order in Kashmir. Rather than imparting formal Islamic teachings, he, as a Sufi Rishi, disseminated a message of universal brotherhood through his poetry (shrakh), which resonated even with the illiterate populace of Kashmir (Odin, 2013, p. 17). The Rishi tradition in Kashmir boasts a rich history, tracing back to pre-Vedic times, and

continues to be revered by all Kashmiris—Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, and others (Para et al., 2022, p. 7). Understanding Kashmiri Islamic Rishism necessitates considering both Sufism and the pre-Islamic Rishi tradition of Kashmir, as thousands of Rishis have profoundly influenced local culture. This study endeavours to critically examine the origins of the Rishi order in Kashmir and the role of Nanda Rishi in the spread of Islam throughout the valley.

Wider Significance of Syncretic Society

Sufism was significantly influenced by Shaivism, and they practised Yoga. Many Sufis regarded Hindu yogis as allies and fellow practitioners. They often viewed them as experts from whom they could learn practical and effective mysticism techniques. These techniques could help practitioners, whether yogis or Sufis, draw closer to God or achieve various esoteric goals (Ernst, 2019, para. 2). Nur-ud-Din, who was motivated by Lal Ded's Shaiva philosophy, preached his message not only the principles of the Islamic faith but also spreading non-religious spiritual messages for the people of Kashmir. The Sufis, after Nur-ud-Din, also preached the same syncretic messages to everyone in the Valley (Para et al., 2022, pp. 5–6). It can be said that Shaivism and Sufism not only moulded the history and the traditional culture of Kashmir but also contributed remarkably to the evolution and development of the composite culture of India. The interaction between Kashmir Shaivism and Sufism extends beyond a purely academic discussion, representing a profound dialogue that fosters both cultural and spiritual cohesion. This exchange has historically bridged diverse communities, allowing for a synthesis of philosophical and ethical perspectives that enrich the collective consciousness of Kashmir. Such a dialogue also facilitates a deeper understanding of shared heritage, particularly the concept of Kashmiriyat, which emphasizes tolerance, coexistence, and mutual respect among different religious and spiritual traditions (Dar, 2004; Parimoo, 1987). By highlighting common ethical principles and spiritual practices, the convergence of Shaivite and Sufi thought underscores the region's unique syncretic identity and its enduring commitment to social harmony. The Valley of Kashmir has made an enduring contribution to Indian philosophy, thought, historiography, and cultural expressions, becoming a vital part of India's process of transculturation. Historically, this transcultural exchange was not limited to Kashmir but extended to various regions of India, where traditions of Shaivism, Sufism, and Rishism stimulated intellectual, spiritual, and social

development (Raina, 2019, p. 45; Bazaz, 2011, p. 122). The people, socio-cultural organisation, language, literature, festivals, and everyday practices in Kashmir reflect this syncretic ethos, which calls for revitalisation to preserve its unique identity (Dar, 2021, p. 88). Social variables such as acculturation, assimilation, and diffusion influenced both Hindus and Muslims, shaping their religious beliefs, customs, and traditions (Shafi, 2016, p. 77). Thus, Kashmir Shaivism and Sufism together offer profound insights into existence and spirituality, while also fostering a shared cultural foundation (Toshkhani, 2014, p. 63).

Comparison with other Philosophies

The manifestation process in Kashmir Shaivism is compared to the concepts of 'Nature Naturans' and 'Nature Naturata' in Spinoza's philosophy, as well as the 'matter' and 'form' concepts in Aristotle's philosophy (Tantray et al., 2018, p. 1). The Kashmiri Sufi poetic tradition, stemming from the synthesis of Shaivism and Sufism, has continued to evolve and be enriched by later poets who have drawn upon both the indigenous and imported elements of this tradition. Nund Rishi, while being influenced by Lal-Ded's spiritual tradition, synthesised Shaivism with Islamic concepts and practices, creating a unique Sufi poetry that celebrates the oneness of being and the attainment of divine union through self-recognition (Shafi, 2016, p. 80). The continuity and evolution of this Kashmiri Sufi poetic tradition through the works of various poets from the 18th to the 20th century highlights how they have broadened, deepened, and enriched the tradition through their own spiritual experiences and creative expressions.

Lal Ded's view about Islam and Sufism

Lal Ded was a 14th-century mystic poet from Kashmir. Her poetry is in Kashmiri, and both Hindus and Muslims revere her. Her teachings probably transcend religious boundaries. But the user specifically wants to know about her views on Islam and Sufism. Kashmir during her time was a place where Hinduism and Islam coexisted, and Sufi traditions were influential. Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam, emphasising a personal connection with the divine. Lal Ded is often associated with the Kashmiri Shaivite tradition, which is a form of Hinduism focused on Shiva. However, her appeal across religions suggests she might have incorporated elements from both traditions (Hassnain, 2015, p. 66). Her poetry, called vakhs, often uses metaphors and allegories; some of her verses talk about the impermanence of the physical world and the importance of inner realisation. But how does that relate to Islam

and Sufism? Sufis also emphasise inner spirituality over ritual, seeking union with the divine, which is similar to some Hindu mystical traditions. Maybe Lal Ded's teachings resonated with Sufi ideas because of this overlap in mysticism (Dar, 2021, p. 93).

An important question for researchers is whether Lal Ded was a Muslim or not. According to the information available, Lal Ded was born into a Hindu family, while some sources indicate that she had close contact with Sufi saints. The story of her interaction with the famous Sufi saint Syed Ali Hamadani is found in the works of many authors. Although there is a lack of reliable information about it (Bazaz, 1959, pp. 118–119). In this regard, the folklore prevalent in Kashmir provides some information. There is a famous story of Lal Ded's meeting with Sheikh Nuruddin Noorani, who was a Sufi Rishi. Their conversation is marked as a symbol of Kashmiri syncretism. Although Lal Ded was rooted in Shaivism, her teachings influenced or harmonised the Kashmiri Sufi sage's thought. Like the Sufi saints, Lal Ded emphasised the impermanence of the physical world and the importance of spiritual discipline for attaining divine union (Wani, 2009, pp. 142–143).

In her poetry, she criticises empty rituals and emphasises direct experience of the divine. That's a common theme in both Sufism and Bhakti movements. So maybe her view on Islam, or at least Sufism, is that the outer forms of religion are less important than the inner spiritual quest. She might have seen Sufism as a path similar to her own Kashmiri Shaivism, both aiming for union with the divine beyond doctrinal differences. It is not that he explicitly preached Islam or converted to Islam just because his teachings were accepted by both communities (Bazaz, 1959, pp. 118–120; Kaw, 2004, p. 67). Rather, his focus was on the universal aspects of spirituality. Also, considering the political and social context of her time, Kashmir was undergoing Islamic influence, so her ability to transcend religious labels might have been a way to bridge communities. But her primary framework was still Shaivism. However, the syncretic culture of Kashmir allowed her *vaakhs* to be embraced by Muslims, especially Sufis, who found common ground in the mystical experience.

Lal Ded, the 14th-century Kashmiri mystic poet, is celebrated for transcending religious boundaries, with her teachings resonating deeply within both Hindu and Islamic traditions, particularly Sufism. Her views on Islam and Sufism can be understood through the following points:

1. **Syncretic Spirituality:** Lal Ded's poetry (*vaakhs*) emphasizes universal spiritual truths over sectarian dogma.

While rooted in Kashmiri Shaivism, her teachings align with Sufi mysticism in their focus on inner realization, divine unity, and transcending ritualistic formalism. She critiques empty rituals, advocating instead for direct, personal experience of the divine—a theme central to both Sufism and Bhakti traditions (Parimoo, 1978, p. 112).

2. **Influence of Sufi Thought:** Although born into a Hindu Brahmin family, Lal Ded's engagement with Sufi saints, such as Sayyid Ali Hamadani and Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani, reflects Kashmir's syncretic culture. Her verses frequently echo Sufi ideas like *fana* (the annihilation of the ego) and the quest for divine love (*ishq*), indicating a shared mystical ethos despite differing theological frameworks (Rizvi, 1983, p. 215).
3. **Unity of Divine Experience:** Lal Ded's view posits that all genuine spiritual paths, including Islam (via Sufism), lead to the same ultimate truth. Her famous *vakh*, "Shiva is everywhere, know Him as the sun. Know not the Pandit different to the Muslim..." underscores this inclusivity, mirroring the Sufi belief in *wahdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence) (Bamzai, 1994, p. 236). She saw external religious labels as secondary to the inner quest for oneness with the divine.

Lal Ded's rejection of rigid orthodoxy in favour of heartfelt devotion resonates with Sufism's emphasis on inner purity over outward observance. This stance allowed her poetry to bridge Hindu and Muslim communities, fostering a shared spiritual heritage in Kashmir. Lal Ded's enduring appeal among both Hindus and Muslims illustrates her role as a unifying figure. Her teachings exemplify the Kashmiriyat tradition—a cultural identity emphasising coexistence—and highlight the compatibility of mystical experiences across religions. Considering the spatial, architectural and material dimensions of fourteenth-century Kashmir – such as shared sacred sites, religious sites and material culture associated with Shaivism and Sufism – can complement the textual analysis and provide a more holistic understanding of their synergetic relationships (Aslam, 2020).

Conclusion

The paper suggests that the spiritual and cultural traditions represented by Lal-Ded and Nund Rishi remain highly relevant and influential in contemporary Kashmiri poetry, encompassing both Sufi and Shaivism. Their works and

teachings are seen as a living, vibrant tradition that shapes the shared spiritual and cultural consciousness of Kashmiris. Kashmir is a site of cultural and spiritual confluence, where the indigenous Shaivite tradition and the Sufi tradition that gained popularity in the region have been synthesised and assimilated. This synthesis is embodied in the works and spiritual experiences of key figures like Lal-Ded and Nund Rishi. The paper highlights how Kashmiri culture has been a site of synthesis between the indigenous Shaivite tradition and the imported Sufi tradition that gained popularity in the region. Key figures like Lal-Ded and Nund Rishi are presented as embodying this synthesis, blending concepts and themes from both traditions in their poetry and spiritual experiences. Shiva represents the 'form' or 'light' aspect of reality, while Shakti represents the 'matter' or 'activity' aspect. The manifestation occurs through the union of Shiva and Shakti, where Shiva represents potential energy, while Shakti embodies its dynamic expression.

Lal Ded's poems (vaakhs) were an amalgam of mystical Saivism and Sufism, which resonated with the common people. Nanda Rishi, a celibate and vegetarian, was a real humanist. The indigenous Rishi movement, rooted in Kashmir's spiritual heritage, prepared a mindset that was responsible for the spread of Islam in Kashmir through a Sufi-Rishi movement distinct from the efforts of Sayyids. The major findings of this study satisfy the aim of examining the syncretic culture in Kashmir, particularly the influence of Shaivism and Sufism, as represented through the conceptions of Lal Ded and Nanda Rishi. Lalla's vaakhs reflect her shifting from the absolute to the relative level of understanding, conveying the different heights of consciousness of unity within duality. Lalla's vaakhs consolidated the fundamental competencies and process of understanding of the ultimate reality in a way that integrates Kashmiri Shaivism and Sufism, as seen in the 14th-century syncretic culture of Kashmir.

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